POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS OF OLD BURMA

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FOREWORD

The sixth annual meeting of the Far Eastern Association held in New York City April 13-15, 1954, included a symposium on traditional society in Southeast Asia which was opened by Professor Cady with the paper here reproduced. This discussion of native Burmese government and administration was followed by papers on "The Vietnam State Prior to French Occupation" by Milton Sacks of Yale University, and "The Strength of the Autocratic Tradition in Thailand" by Walter Vella of the University of California. It is expected that these last two papers will be published elsewhere in the near future.

Before the war Dr. Cady taught history at Judson College in Rangoon. During and after the war he served with the Department of State both in Washington and in Burma before taking up his present position in the Department of History at Ohio University. During most of 1952 and into 1953, Dr. Cady was Visiting Professor in the Department of History and in the Southeast Asia Program at Cornell University. The Program staff wishes to express its appreciation to Professor Cady for his permission to issue this brief study in its present form.

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The concept of divine kingship which prevailed in old Burma was based on immemorial sanctions derived mainly from India. These included the physical fact of royal political and military dominance, the assiduous ministrations of Brahman priests who were in perennial attendance at the Burmese Court, plus the principle of Karma, which attributed one's personal status in the present life to the inexorable outcome of deeds performed in a previous existence. Popular reverence was accorded to the ruler concretely considered, securely installed in his palace, authenticated by royal lineage preferably on both sides of the family, supported by the panoply of religious and political symbols of authority. The king was invariably addressed as a lower form of deity, a practice requiring special vocabulary and modes of speech. To the king the Burman nation granted unquestioned acceptance of the ruler's right to control the lives and property and to command the personal services of all of his subjects. Except for those high functionaries of the government who owed their position to royal favor, there probably existed little or no feeling of loyalty for the king personally.

The royal family stood distinctly apart from the population as a whole, for Burmese society, even though stratified, included no hereditary nobility or caste distinctions outside the Court circle. Partly because of the qualitative superiority of royalty, the king invariably married a number of his half-sisters or cousins, and a usurping ruler, if a brother, sometimes acquired the wives as well as the throne of his predecessor. Male children born to the ruler's principal wives (customarily four in number) plus surviving royal brothers and the chief queen were accorded by hereditary right places of honor in public affairs and the enjoyment of the government's share of the revenues collectable from designated units of the kingdom.

Brahman priests at Court contributed substantially to the aura of royal divinity by performing their rituals at coronation ceremonies and at all formal audiences of the king. During the course of one British mission in the 1790's, the Burmese king requested urgently that as rulers of India the British demonstrate their friendship by furnishing him with a genuine Brahman priest accompanied by an equally valid Brahman wife, both to reside at the Burmese capital. From India also came the traditions that the king alone merited the white umbrella and that all the elephants were the exclusive property of the king and could be ridden only by his express consent. The white elephant was in fact an emanation of deity, and enjoyed the services of high officials plus the revenues from an extensive estate for its upkeep.

To serve his royal master as "slave" was the highest honor a Burman subject could attain. The title accorded to all high officials in the government was that of wun, meaning "burden" or "burden-bearer"; it was the esteemed privilege of these wuns to bear on their heads the burden of the "golden feet" of the king. For anyone else but the king to put a Burman under foot was to inflict an insufferable humiliation; for the divine king to do it was, by contrast, to bestow an honor. Criminal law operated as an expression of the will of the ruling sovereign; his death or deposition ordinarily meant the remission of all fines and the summary pardon of all criminal offenders convicted during his reign. Formal civil court procedure was also an affair of the king's officials. The untrammeled sovereignty of the monarch was thus the essential sanction behind all governmental authority.

In the abeyance of that authority virtual anarchy prevailed until such time as a new ruler was firmly installed in the palace. The only notable exceptions to this rule were in the area of local government, where the vestiges of the authority of the primitive tribal chief survived.

The exclusive status attaching to the person of the king applied also to his capital city and more particularly to the fortified environs of the inner palace. Selected military regiments garrisoned the capital area at all times, while trusted army leaders guarded the four gates of the palace itself. No unauthorized person of whatever rank or dignity was permitted to bring a weapon into the sacred palace precincts, and no important prince could so much as enter the palace when the king was absent from it. Weak kings never left the palace at all. Fearful ones eliminated all rivals, if possible. Because dynastic or national misfortune was customarily associated with the anger of the spirit inhabiting an obviously inauspicious palace site, the relocation of the capital was frequently regarded as necessary. New locations were selected with the help of diviners, astrologers and numerologists, mainly of Hindu training, to whose pronouncements high deference was paid. Four separate Burma capitals were occupied during the troubled 35 years from 1822 to 1857 despite the terrific hardship and expense which each shift entailed.

Some of the outward symbols of royalty were clearly of Chinese origin. Mr. Desai records that in 1837 the victorious usurper, Prince Tharrawaddy, paused briefly at a private palace shrine to do obeisance to miniature images representing the spirits of his royal ancestors. The Burmans also imitated the Chinese practice of restricting the wearing of the yellow girdle or belt to the Imperial clansmen, plus the allocation of appropriate sashes for the nine grades of Chinese civil service officials. The Burman Court indicated gradations of rank by using the tsaloe, a sash composed of multiple strands of golden-colored rope fastened together over the left shoulder and on the breast and running under the right arm. The king merited a tsaloe of twenty-four strands, the heir-apparent one of eighteen, and the minor princes one of twelve. Royal officials of the Court and in the provinces wore tsaloes of nine, six, and three strands according to their respective levels of authority. Only the king could merit the use of the peacock emblem, while the wearing of anklets, brocaded silk, and precious stones was reserved exclusively for royalty. Golden and red umbrellas were permitted minor dignitaries. Old Burma tolerated no unseemly strutting about by social climbers, especially in the vicinity of the capital. No more serious political offense could be committed than to pretend to a dignity or social status for which one was not qualified.

As a general rule the Burmese king stood apart from the official administrative agencies ofthe government. These centered at the Hlutdaw Yon, or Royal Council Hall, located adjacent to but outside the inner palace enclosure. The great Wuns (Wungyis) of the Hlutdaw Court, usually four in number, were selected in theory and usually in fact on the basis of their sagacity and administrative experience. Theirs was the ultimate responsibility for decisions covering all phases of the central government, executive, legislative, judicial or military. All major governmental actions were issued in the name of the Hlutdaw. They acted as a group in making their decisions, although an individual Wungyi often took over administrative supervision of functions in which he had special competence. The king or the Crown Prince on rare occasions actually presided over the deliberations of the Hlutdaw Council. Its actions in any case were reviewed on a daily basis by the ruler, with the

assistance of a separate group of Privy Counsellors functioning inside the palace walls. Although the king could elevate or degrade Hlutdaw members at will, he did not as a rule interfere arbitrarily with the considered decisions of the Council.

Government functioned at its optimum effectiveness when the Hlutdaw was ably manned and was supported by the king in the exercise of its best judgment. Government was best near the capital; it was less effective in distant areas where abuses could not easily be checked. A bigoted or irresponsible ruler could deny the Hlutdaw any real power and operate through personal favorites. The progressive weakening of governmental authority under such conditions eventually would plunge the entire kingdom into a condition of semi-anarchy. Political disaffection would take the form of support for a rival prince-pretender. Only if the king retained full control of affairs until the end of his reign and saw his designated heir firmly installed within the palace fortress prior to his passing could the succession be accomplished without untoward incident. Even then much confusion ensued, because all major governmental posts and fiefs were subject to reassignment by the new sovereign. The principal defects of royal government in old Burma stemmed from its despotic character and from the uncertainty of succession to the throne.

In the administrative aspects of government the Burma Court followed the general pattern of the Chinese system, no doubt because of its periodic contacts with Peking. Chinese practice was reflected not only in the assignment of regional Viceroys and Governors, but also in the appointment to important posts of Burman officials highly literate in both Burmese and Pali. These latter served as secretaries, scribes, and readers within the palace itself, at the Hlutdaw Yon, and at the seats of provincial Governors. The Wundauk assistants to the respective members of the Hlutdaw Council, who had charge of its agenda and did much of its work, were invariably young men of ability and training. The usual road for a promising man ambitious for political preferment was to attach himself to the entourage of some official of prominence as an expert secretary-assistant in the hope that he might ride upward on his mentor's political coattail. The percentage of male literacy in old Burma was unusually high. There were, of course, no state-sponsored examinations in any way comparable to the Chinese Civil Service examinations, except perhaps in the restricted field of the Buddhist scriptures. Appointments to Governorships at the capital or in the provinces were made admittedly on grounds of administrative experience and political connections. But standards of literary competence were nevertheless recognized in making appointments at the Court, in the royal archives, in the Yons (Councils) of the Provincial Governors (Myowuns), and also in the leading pagoda library centers.

Im emergencies, the Court accorded viceregal authority to Governors located in important frontier posts like Rangoon. Such persons exercised military authority as well as civil jurisdiction and were even empowered to conduct diplomatic negotiations. The Burman Court, like the Chinese, received regular tribute-bearing missions from minor neighboring states (mainly Shan), but developed no machinery at the capital for entertaining diplomatic missions from other than tributary states. The government included, for example, no department of foreign affairs and likewise made no provision for permanent residence at the capital of foreign diplomatic representatives. The enforced presence of a British-Indian Resident at Ava and Amarapura from 1830 to 1840, for example, was regarded in Burma as a flagrant derogation of the king's authority. It permitted the presence of a foreign conspirator-spy within

the sacred capital precincts. Commissioner Burney's proposal on one occasion to fortify his residency quarters brought a most emphatic veto.

Ad hoc diplomatic missions visiting the capital, whether Chinese or British, were invariably the particular concern of the Myowun Governors assigned to the points of entry, Bhamo in the case of Chinese missions, Pegu or Rangoon in the case of the British. These frontier governors were responsible for escorting diplomatic visitors to the capital, for providing their physical needs en route, and for otherwise expediting the course of their negotiations. The cost of such escort services was chargeable not to the central treasury but to special assessments levied on the unlucky population of the province of entry, presumably as penalty for the ineptitude of the Myowun in not forestalling the mission itself. The similarity between this practice and Canton Hoppo's assigned responsibility in the eighteenth century for controlling China's foreign relations is obvious.

The semi-feudal aspects of government in old Burma appear to have been indigenous in their origins. One of these was the Myosa system, already referred to, under which the brothers, uncles, and chief wives of the kings were each assigned on non-permanent tenure the enjoyment of the royal revenues normally collectable from an assigned area or city. The Myosa (literally "eater of the city") exercised extensive authority over revenue collections within his area, and some police and judicial authority, but not to the derogation of all control by royal officials. The Myosa usually kept a small band of armed retainers, but he was never a feudal lord in the military sense. All subjects of the king including those living in Myosa areas owed to the monarch directly their personal services, including military service, an obligation which was never diverted to the Myosa.

Other high officials of the Court not members of royalty were also granted minor revenue-collecting privileges within more restricted areas to supplement their otherwise meager income from commissions and court fees. Provincial officials ordinarily took their pay from fees and revenues passing through their hands, acting in the time-honored mandarin fashion. After 1861, King Mindon attempted to abolish the Myosa system by channelling all revenues into a central treasury from which salaries and stipends were paid. But the difficulties were many, and he experienced much less than complete success in this reform effort.

The authority of the myothugyi, or township headman, differed qualitatively from that of governmental officials in that it was hereditary and rooted locally. His de facto authority stemmed not from the king but from hereditary right as chief and from the voluntary allegiance and loyalty of the people of his jurisdiction. The status of every myothugyi was subject to confirmation by the Hlutdaw, but such authentication was based not on arbitrary royal authority, but on evidence of hereditary claims filed in the census archives and on the candidate's enjoyment of positive local support.

In areas of Upper Burma where the royal agricultural lands were allocated to the special service ahmudan groups which provided troops for the capital garrison, the myothugyi was normally regimental commander and leader of a particular asu or service group. The royal lands were apportioned in varying amounts for the use of families of privates, corporals, sergeants, and lieutenants of the several regiments, with a single unit group or daing of three to four families responsible for cultivating the land to furnish support for

members assigned in rotation to military or service duty at the capital. Full fledged members of each service asu were tatooed with appropriate symbols as a kind of permanent commitment to their status. As recognized leader of such a regimental group, the ahmudan myothugyi promoted the social interests of his group, apportioned peacetime duties among the members of his asu, mediated disputes, collected royal revenues, and in time of war raised and commanded his army contingent.

The myothugyi in Lower Burma exercised territorial as well as personal jurisdiction over non-service or athi elements of the population. His governmental functions were threefold. He was a police officer, the collector of household taxes, and the local recruiter for the army in time of war. Burman folklore quite understandably associated government in general with fire, flood, plague, and other malevolent forces, but the myothugyi escaped this indictment. The myothugyi protected his people from the rapacity of the Governors and Myosas mainly by underreporting the number of taxable family units within his jurisdiction and then by apportioning in public sessions the total demand as equitably as possible. Technically the myothugyi enjoyed no judicial power, but along with other local elders he frequently mediated differences developing within his township constituency in a common sense manner acceptable to the disputants and according to customary law. This mediatory function corresponds closely with that of elders in the Chinese community. All criminal cases had to be remanded to the court of the royal Myowun.

Much of the myothugyis local prestige derived from his social role as local squire. He staged festivals, helped finance religious celebrations, officiated at boat races and marriages, laid out new irrigation channels. His social prestige in fact was maintained far more by his open-handed generosity than by the possession of political or economic power per se. The greatest abuse of the power of the myothugyi developed from his recruiting authority, especially in athi districts. Since he could call up whom he pleased to meet a specified army quota, and he usually began by drafting members of well-to-do families, who were able and willing to pay a sum to be excused. He ended by assembling his force from the poorer families. The sums realized in this fashion could be used to support the contingent on campaign, but this was not invariably the practice. Sometimes the athi myothugyi, in the capacity of army sergeant, actually commanded his own military unit in the field. As the vestige of tribal leadership, the myothugyi was virtually the only agency in the Burma government which derived its authority and authentication from local tradition and which identified itself with the interests of the people.

A final word concerns the army. The post of commanding general in the Burma army was usually held by one of the four Wungyis or by a royal appointee of equivalent rank. Under the general were the Colonels or Bos, usually civilian political appointees of the king and bound to him by a special loyalty oath. The Bos were authorized to ride elephants, to carry gold umbrellas, and to be escorted by private retainers. Under the Bo Colonels were the professional army officers, captains commanding 250 men, lieutenants over 100 men, and sergeants heading platoons of 50 men each. The professional ahmudan regiments weretspecialized in character, as infantry, artillery, cavalry, archers, boatmen, elephantmen, etc., each basic unit operating under its own myothugyi regimental leader. Artillery regiments in the eighteenth century were composed mainly of the half-caste descendants of Christian Portuguese and French captives taken off ships at Rangoon. The army of old Burma was strong

in its spirit and élan, but short on discipline, organization, and supply services. It declined during the nineteenth century after successive defeats at the hands of the British to little more than a rabble. British proximity, for one thing, put an end to the morale-building forays of the army into neighboring Siam or Manipur.

It is noteworthy that in the revival of Burman military activity since the outbreak of World War II, the leader of an armed force of any size, from Aung San's National Army to the most disreputable rebel or dacoit band has assumed the title of Bo, once reserved for the royally-appointed Colonel of the old Burman army. Vulgarization of usage had tended here as elsewhere to deflate the value of the term employed. The tradition of semi-anarchy and armed dacoity during periods of governmental transition has also been much in evidence since 1945.

What of the survival value of old Burma's political traditions? An attempt may eventually be made to revive the institution of the divine monarchy in Burma. The abortive Saya San rebellion in 1931 was such an endeavor. It involved the appearance of a royal pretender, the establishment of a jungle capital, and the use of religious incantations and cabalistic tatooing on a grand scale. Adipadi Ba Maw tried during the Japanese occupation on a more sophisticated basis to develop the aura of kingship, but without notable success. But the Indian pattern is dead and Brahmanical sanctions are wearing thin. The sophisticated political views of the youthful leaders of independent Burma are inimical to the religious mumbo-jumbo of the past. Premier Nu is more traditionally-minded than many of his political associates, but his endeavor to use Buddhism as a political weapon against alien ideologies has no precedent in the political traditions of old Burma. Such associates as Ba Swe and Ne Win enjoy authority in their own right, as do many local leaders.

A new social structure will have to be developed to replace the shattered power categories of the British system. Local leadership capable of cooperating with the central government, and comparable in authority to that of the traditional hereditary myothugyi will apparently have to be developed. Premier Nu's "self-help" program and his allocation of funds for expenditure by responsible local agencies is a step in this direction. Premier Nu himself acts as a unifying symbol for widely disparate groups, including Socialists, conservative anti-Communists, nationalists, anti-corruptionists and the religiously inclined. He is for the time being substituting for the divine king, while attempting to publicize the alternative and contradictory principle of popular sovereignty. British influence survives mainly in the bureaucratic administration, in the politically detached status of the High Court, and in the deference paid to Parliamentary methods of Cabinet control in an otherwise single-party system. Nehru's leftist and democratic influence is currently more influential than that of totalitarian and Communist China. The outcome for Burma may well depend on the extent to which the emergent state can revitalize constructive aspects of its historic institutions, including the responsible leadership of a strong Cabinet-Hlutdaw, the identification of the locally-rooted myothugyi chief with the interests of his people, and the transference of the high status once accorded to traditional literary accomplishment and learning to the mastery of the modernized curriculum of the schools and university.